

EVENING STAR

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EDITORIAL

Unwise Precedent

It is curious that tomorrow Senator J. William Fulbright will review the qualifications of the nominees to the two top State Department posts behind closed committee doors. In the past, the chairman of the foreign relations panel usually has insisted that Secretary of State Rusk testify in open session under the hot glare of television klieg lights. His rationale then was that the American people were entitled to hear the nation's chief diplomat answer questions put by their elected representatives on Vietnam and other major foreign policy issues. Why not now?

As a practical matter, Secretary of State-designate William P. Rogers and his deputy, Elliot Richardson, probably will be confirmed without any great difficulty. Still, the two nominees, though well qualified in other respects, are nonetheless newcomers to the foreign affairs area. John Foster Dulles and Dean Rusk may have surprised some senators by their performance in office. But at least they compiled a solid body of speeches, articles and related public service beforehand which shed some light on their views about the

world situation. This is hardly the case with either Rogers or Richardson, so their hearing has especial importance.

The point is that international affairs is today no longer the exclusive province of striped-pants diplomats and a few senatorial grandees. As we have seen in the case of Vietnam, a major foreign policy initiative cannot be sustained indefinitely in the face of deep-seated opposition by even a relatively small segment of the population. For Fulbright, who as much as anyone brought this lesson home, this whole business of a closed session to review the new Secretary of State's credentials is a most peculiar about-face.

There are some special factors that might conceivably justify a preliminary session behind closed doors. One is the nominees' inexperience in the foreign affairs field. Another is Fulbright's natural desire for a private discussion of how relations between his committee and the State Department might be improved in the future. But a closed hearing should be followed by an open one later this week, or in any event before the two nominees are confirmed by the Senate.